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Polymer workshop defers to NAACP boycott of South Carolina

by Mairin Brennan

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The executive committee of the American Chemical Society's Division of Polymer Chemistry has relocated the division's fluoropolymer workshop from Charleston, S.C.-where it was scheduled to be held in October-to Savannah, Ga. The division's official announcement states: "In order to better serve the needs of our diverse membership, the [division] decided to move the Fluoropolymer 2000 workshop to Savannah, Ga., to be held Oct. 15-18."

The move is in response to a boycott against South Carolina imposed by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and brought to the division's attention by Joseph M. DeSimone, a professor of chemistry at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and a professor of chemical engineering at North Carolina State University, Raleigh. On Jan. 1, NAACP launched economic sanctions against the tourism industry in South Carolina to pressure the state to stop flying the Confederate flag over its Capitol building. The flag, which NAACP considers a symbol of slavery, was raised in 1962 to commemorate the Civil War centennial. In announcing the sanctions, NAACP stated that all previous attempts to remove the flag "have been quashed by legislators who have sole power" over its placement. "South Carolina is the only state to fly the Confederate flag over its Statehouse," it noted (<http://www.naacp.org>).



Clockwise from rear left: Carson, Young, Wells, and Bunyard.

Implications of the boycott began to trouble DeSimone. He had accepted an invitation to speak at the workshop, and his graduate students would be attending with him. "I have a very diverse group of graduate students," DeSimone tells C&EN. "I wanted to have everyone feel comfortable about participating in that meeting."

Our group is really focused on fluoropolymers and this is our preeminent meeting. I brought up the issue of the boycott with my senior graduate students and we had a good healthy debate about it."

The students decided they wanted to take an active part in supporting the boycott. Together with DeSimone, they composed a letter to the organizer of the workshop-Dennis W. Smith Jr., an assistant professor of chemistry at Clemson University, in Clemson, S.C.-in which DeSimone stated: "My graduate students and I support the NAACP's position that this symbol of institutionalized racism should be removed from the seat of current political sovereignty. As the Fluoropolymer Conference is currently planned to take place in Charleston, S.C., my research group must regretfully forego participation, and I must rescind my agreement to give an invited lecture." He suggested that the organizing committee postpone the conference until a new location could be found.

Smith swiftly alerted the Polymer Division's executive committee about DeSimone's decision, but indicated that the organizing committee unanimously recommended not moving the workshop. The decision to relocate it was not reached "without some debate," Smith tells C&EN. "There were differences of opinion between the organizing committee and members of the executive committee that had nothing to do with the flag or racism. They had to do with whether a scientific organization should support or condemn the actions of special-interest groups that are unrelated to its charter. It was a constructive debate, and we're all stronger for it."

DeSimone's senior graduate students-Clay Bunyard and Jennifer Young, who are white, and Terri Carson and Sharon Wells, who are black-hail from Mississippi, Maryland, North Carolina, and South Carolina, respectively. After researching the history of the Confederate flag, they concluded "it serves as a symbol for various modern-day groups that advocate white supremacy," Carson tells C&EN. Flying the flag over the Capitol is upsetting to people who believe the flag represents slavery or white supremacy, Bunyard elaborates. He acknowledges that some people view the flag as a symbol of their past or the struggles of the South, but says: "I don't think it's necessary to place it over the Capitol. It could be moved to a more historically significant place such as the monument to the people who fought in the Civil War. And NAACP is amenable to that."

Commenting on the relocation of the workshop, Smith says: "The organizing committee respects the decision and wisdom of the executive board, and we're all happy to move forward and go to Savannah and have a great conference." Meanwhile, the four UNC graduate students have had "nothing but positive feedback from their fellow students and their families" for the role they played, DeSimone says. "They are excited to be able to make an impact."

According to data provided by NAACP, 75 groups had relocated events scheduled to be held in South Carolina as of Feb. 23

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